DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 053 408 CG 006 551

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| TITLE | The Effect of Group Composition and Time on Sensitivity Training. |
| INSTITUTION | Connecticut Univ., Storrs. |
| PUB DATE | Apr 71 |
| NOTE | 9p.; Speech given before Eastern Psychological Association Annual Meeting (42nd, New York, N.Y., April 15-17, 1971) |
| EDRS PRICE | EDRS Price MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29 |
| DESCRIPTORS | Group Behavior, *Group Dynamics, Grouping Procedures, *Group Membership, Group Relations, Groups, *Group Structure, *Interaction Process Analysis, *T Groups, Training Laboratories |

ABSTRACT

The relationship of 2 important variables -- group composition and time -- to the verbal behavior of sensitivity training groups, using 2 recently developed assessment procedures, is investigated. Sensitivity groups were composed according to the interpersonal skills of participants, as measured by a structured behavioral technique, the Group Assessment of Interpersonal Traits (GAIT). Group verbal behavior was assessed using the Group Interaction Profile (GRIP). Two hypotheses were tested on 66 college males and females: (1) sensitivity groups composed of members rated high on interpersonal skills will demonstrate more personal discussion than groups consisting of members rated low on these skills; and (2) group related discussion will increase as a function of time spent in sensitivity group sessions. The measurement instruments are briefly discussed and the results analyzed summarily. Both hypotheses were supported. (TL)

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# THE EFFECT OF GROUP COMPOSITION AND TIME ON SENSITIVITY TRAINING[1]

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Given the increasing use of group procedures in many different settings, focus on variables that maximize the effectiveness of these groups is critical. The vast array of new techniques in both sensitivity training (Bradford, Gibb, & Bennis, 1964; Schein & Bennis, 1965) and group psychotherapy (Yalom, 1970) makes systematic study of variables effecting "therapeutic" process and outcome even more important. As Yalom (1970) states,

> Unfortunately, the current state of affairs is that the adoption of a new method is a function of the vigor, persuasiveness, or charisma of its proponent. . . . Many therapists without a commitment to research have found themselves unreasonably unreceptive to all new approaches or, on the contrary, swept along with a current fad, and then, dissatisfied with its limitations, they have gone on to yet another [pp. 384-385].

A review of the research literature on sensitivity training, in particular, (e.g., Campbell & Dunnette, 1968; House, 1967) reveals a need for the isolation and study of variables critical to the effectiveness of this increasingly popular group procedure. In addition, the use of more sophisticated assessment procedures which focus on the actual interpersonal behavior of participants in sensitivity training is another area deserving increased research concern.

The present research investigates the relationship of two important variables--group composition and time--to the verbal behavior of sensitivity training groups, using two recently developed assessment procedures. Sensitivity groups were composed according to the interpersonal skills of participants

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[1]Paper presented at the meeting of the Eastern Psychological Association, New York, April 1971.

[2]The authors would like to express their gratitude to Frances Caponegro, Joan Connorton, and Elaine Smack who served as raters, and to Gina Singer who assisted in data analysis.

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on the dimensions of "empathic understanding," "acceptance-warmth," and "honesty-openness." These variables, each an important aspect of interpersonal sensitivity, were measured using a structured behavioral technique, the Group Assessment of Interpersonal Traits (GAIT) (Goodman, 1965, 1970). Group verbal behavior was assessed using the Group Interaction Profile (GRIP) (Getter, Korn, & Anchor, 1970). The GRIP consists of two major dimensions for categorizing group discussion: Personal versus Impersonal and Group Related versus Group Unrelated Discussion.

The following hypotheses were investigated:

1. Sensitivity groups composed of members rated high on interpersonal skills will demonstrate more personal discussion than groups consisting of members rated low on these skills.

2. Group related discussion will increase as a function of time spent in sensitivity group sessions.

## Method

### Subjects

Sixty-six college students (33 males, 33 females), volunteers from an introductory psychology course, served as Ss.

### Procedure

The GAIT. All Ss were pretested on the GAIT. The GAIT is a small group situation in which each of the participants is asked to present a personal problem. Another group member then engages the first in a short conversation focusing on understanding the problem. This sequence is followed until each group member has been a "discloser" and an "understander." Ratings of each group member on the qualities of understanding, openness, and acceptance-warmth are made on a 6-point scale by three advanced clinical psychology graduate students who observe each GAIT group.

Group composition. Observer ratings of understanding, openness, and acceptance-warmth were summed to form a composite score labelled "Therapeutic Talent" (TT) (Goodman, 1965), an overall estimate of interpersonal sensitivity. The distributions of TT scores for males and for females were divided by a median split into High TT Ss and Low TT Ss. Then, participants were assigned to one of three types of groups: High Therapeutic Talent groups (HTT) in which all participants scored above the TT median; Low Therapeutic Talent groups (LTT) in which all participants scored below the median; and Mixed Therapeutic Talent groups (MTT) in which half scored above and half scored below the median. The final sample consisted of four HTT groups, three LTT groups, and five MTT groups. While all groups were to have six participants (three males, three females), subject attrition reduced group size in some cases; nevertheless, no group had less than four members.

Sensitivity training. Several weeks after pretesting, Ss participated in a leaderless, audiotape sensitivity training program called PEER (Planned Experiences for Effective Relating) (Berzon, Reisel, & Davis, 1967; Berzon & Warren, 1970). A modified version of PEER was presented in an 8-hour "marathon" session. Verbal as well as nonverbal activities were included in this standardized training experience. The activities selected included pooling secrets, practicing feedback, and other common sensitivity group activities.

Group verbal behavior. As part of each training session, all groups were given three 30-minute periods of "free activity" during which they were instructed to act in any constructive way they wished. The free periods occurred before PEER began, in the middle of PEER, and at the end of the 8-hour program. The discussion during these free periods was recorded and the verbal content was later rated using the GRIP. This rating was performed by three trained undergraduates. The first 20 minutes of each 30-minute segment was used, and

each minute of group discussion was categorized into one of the four following combinations: Personal-Group Related, Personal-Group Unrelated, Impersonal-Group Related, and Impersonal-Group Unrelated. The use of these types of discussion was summed across the three time periods to arrive at an overall estimate of the amount of time spent in various kinds of discussion. This was then related to type of group: HTT, LTT, or MTT. Also, by summing across groups, an estimate of the use of these types of discussion at each of the three times of the session was obtained.

## Results

Reliability. The average r, corrected by the Spearman-Brown formula (McNemar, 1962), of the three GAIT observers was .56 for understanding, .45 for openness, and .54 for acceptance-warmth. The percentage of agreement on the GRIP (defined as at least two of the three raters in agreement) was 96%.

Group verbal behavior. With regard to the first prediction, it was found that HTT groups used significantly more overall personal discussion during the free periods than MTT groups ($\chi^2 = 9.93$, $p < .01$) and MTT groups engaged in more personal discussion than LTT groups ($\chi^2 = 15.69$, $p < .001$). Similar

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Insert Table 1 about here

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differences among these groups were found for the Personal-Group Related category as well. Regarding the second prediction, it was found that overall group related discussion increased significantly from Time 1 to Time 2 ($\chi^2 = 21.41$, $p < .001$) and from Time 2 to Time 3 ($\chi^2 = 10.78$, $p < .01$). Similar results were found across time for the Personal-Group Related category.

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Insert Table 2 about here

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Implications and Conclusions

This study provides information about both the process of sensitivity training and its assessment. Complex interpersonal skills, relatively reliably rated on the GAIT, were found to significantly affect independent measures of sensitivity group performance. Groups composed of members high in TT tend to discuss not only more personal issues but also more personal matters related to their group experience than groups having members low on these skills. Thus, it would appear important to consider the variable of group composition in both research and clinical applications of sensitivity groups. One could conceivably alter the functioning of a group by preselecting members, and this might best be accomplished in terms of the interpersonal behavior of the prospective group member. The GAIT's usefulness in meeting this assessment need has been shown here and evidence of the GAIT's "predictive validity" as well as its usefulness in isolating critical interpersonal skills has been presented. In addition, this study supports the notion that prediction from testing procedures will be most effective when the testing situation is similar to the criterion situation (Rotter, 1960). To predict interpersonal behavior one must assess this behavior under conditions psychologically similar to those in which the expected behavior will occur. Evidently, the GAIT provides an assessment situation sufficiently similar to that of sensitivity training to afford meaningful predictions based on GAIT performance.

The importance of time factors in sensitivity training has been demonstrated as well. Both overall group related discussion and personal discussion related to the group tend to increase over time. The PEER program emphasizes both personal discussion and concern with what is happening in the group itself. Apparently, the PEER successfully structures group behavior in the desired direction and fosters "transfer" of training to a relatively structureless

situation. Future research is called for to ascertain whether or not this "training" transfers to extra-group situations.

Finally, the GRIP has been shown to be a highly reliable measure of group interaction, and the PEER shows much promise as a standardized sensitivity training procedure.

Further research on sensitivity training employing the GAIT and the GRIP is currently in progress (D'Augelli, n.d.). This research will investigate the interaction of interpersonal skills (measured by the GAIT) and pregroup structuring. Groups composed of participants previously rated as high or low in interpersonal skills will be exposed to one of three types of instructional sets before engaging in a 2-hour sensitivity group session. These instructional sets will either allow practice of critical within-group behaviors, merely describe these behaviors, or provide no information about these behaviors. Both group verbal behavior, rated with the GRIP, and individual verbal behavior, rated with a category system developed by Whalen (1969), will be assessed. Attempts are being made to further refine the GAIT procedure as well. The assessment criteria have been made more objective and preliminary results indicate that inter-observer reliability has been markedly improved. In addition, behavioral correlates of GAIT ratings will be obtained, using two additional observers of each group.

Thus, in summary, it appears that the two assessment procedures used in this study, the Group Assessment of Interpersonal Traits, and the Group Interaction Profile, hold much promise for research in the area of group functioning.

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TABLE 1

Use of Personal and Impersonal Discussion
by High Therapeutic Talent (HTT), Low Therapeutic Talent (LTT),
and Mixed Therapeutic Talent (MTT) Groups

| | Personal | Impersonal | |
|---|---|---|---|
| HTT | 71 | 153 | 224 |
| LTT | 4 | 120 | 124 |
| MTT | 46 | 199 | 245 |
| | 121 | 472 | 593 |

$\chi^2 = 40.24$, $p < .001$

TABLE 2

Use of Group Related and Group Unrelated Discussion Over Time

| | Group Related | Group Unrelated | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Time 1 | 22 | 217 | 239 |
| Time 2 | 47 | 128 | 175 |
| Time 3 | 79 | 100 | 179 |
| | 148 | 445 | 593 |

$\chi^2 = 67.14$, $p < .001$